

RIVER, LAKES & COORONG ACTION GROUP Inc.

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Press Release

Community monitors in search of answers

18 May 2009

The recent rain created an opportunity for community monitors to learn more of the impact of rewetting of the acid sulfate soils (ASS) that have become the subject of such controversy in the Lower Lakes. On 14 and 15 of May, a number of local residents fanned out across a Finniss wetland and tracked up and down the Finniss River near Wally's Landing in search of answers.

Are the rains mobilising the acid in the banks of the rivers and lakes, diluting the acid, or doing a bit of both?

"It's rather like asking is the glass half empty or half full?" says Diane Bell of the River, Lakes and Coorong Action Group Inc (RLCAG). "We all agree there are acid sulfate soils (ASS). In fact we know they occur across vast stretches of the country. Where there is disagreement is on how best to manage ASS and the nature of the risk they pose."

It is not the first time the community monitors have gone in search of answers. They have been monitoring the ASS for some months. "We have taken readings on the banks and in the water of Lake Alexandrina, the Finniss River and Currency Creek," says John Yelland of the RLCAG. "We have been following the CSIRO field guide and so far have found that the Finniss River is alkaline. This has been consistent with the levels posted by Department of Water, Lands and Biodiversity Conservation on their website." (<http://data.rivermurray.sa.gov.au/>)

The only other publicly available research findings are in the *Preliminary Assessment of Acid Sulfate Soil Materials in Currency Creek, Finniss River, Tookayerta Creek and Black Swamp Region*. "It is a preliminary report. It does not recommend weirs. It does not provide statistics re the amount of acid that might be mobilised. It recommends more monitoring. We are still waiting for the final report," says Bell.

"At the public information sessions we have attended, the scientists have been careful to tell us there is much they do not know, including the rate at which the acid can move from the banks into the rivers. We know that more research is needed and welcome the monitoring being done by the CSIRO. We'd like to be able to work more closely with them. We live here and know the country," says Bell.

"During our two days in the field we were able to check our readings against those of the CSIRO and we are happy to report that our meters and theirs are in synch. That gives us confidence in our findings thus far," says Yelland.

The team was particularly interested to check the "acid in a creek bed that feeds into the Finniss River catchment near Wally's Landing" reported by Minister Maywald (PressRelease 12/05/09). "We visit Wally's landing at least a couple of times a week," says Bell. "The river itself has never been acid and what is really interesting about this "creek" is that by the time the acidified water meets joins up with the water flowing down the anabranch of the Finniss River past Wally's Landing, it is back to being neutral. So the buffering capacity of the river is still high."

Last week a bank of fine lime was spread across the Finniss River just below Wally's Landing and that is also helping to keep the water alkaline.

"The real tragedy of the situation is that it all could have been prevented," says Bell. "I have no doubt the scientists are as frustrated as we are. They have been saying all along, 'Don't let these wetlands dry out.' Heeding that advice would have required the SA Government to address over-allocation in

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the Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges and to have been vigilant regarding water being diverted from the tributaries.”

The community monitors say even so it is not too late. There are local solutions. “The acid creek could simply be ponded. A small clay embankment could be built for an outlay of maybe \$200 and allow the natural process of bioremediation to occur. The good microbes would be able to bring the water back to neutral.”

“Sometimes small is beautiful,” says Bell.

The community will continue to monitor the area and will be posting their findings on www.hurrysavetheMurray.com

For more information contact Diane Bell 0427 554 194



Lime in the Finnis River: photo Diane Bell



John Yelland takes a reading on the Finnis River: Photo Diane Bell